論 文

A Meditation on the Benefits of Mysticism

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Abstract: Mystical experiences are by their nature difficult to describe and often appear as opaque in form, strange, perhaps even unsettling. Yet mysticism is a real part of our lives and as such should arguably be taken into account, particularly when considered from a pragmatic approach to religious practice. The following therefore attempts to consider mysticism from a wider viewpoint arising out of a reading of the famous Japanese scholar and exporter of Zen to the West D. T. Suzuki's work *Mysticism, Christian and Buddhist* (1957). Our study begins with some background comments on beliefs and their lived influences taken from psychological and neurological research before moving into a philosophical argument for an applied acceptance of personal mystical occurrences. Meaning, a need for openness, intrinsic value, and an alternative way of being in the modern world are all examined, and the conclusion is reached that an embrace of mysticism has much to offer both from within and from without established ritualisms.

Keywords: empirical; experiential; mysticism; phenomenology; pragmatism

1. Living

Religion, in my view, is above all about practice, about a lifestyle arising from an accepted outlook, and perhaps none of the major systems accentuates this more than Buddhism. Its teachings are first and foremost pragmatic, praxis-based, highlighting life as it is lived, life as it could be lived better. Its focus is nowhere near the hereafter but rather the here and now, enunciating the experiential and the empirical. It is perhaps for these reasons that Buddhism has come to be embraced by a number of scientifically-minded individuals, both among laymen and within the various professional disciplines of the sciences themselves. Buddhism, it is often thought, is flexible, tolerant, and broad enough to accommodate whatever new discoveries might be made without losing any of its core teachings or being forced to resist what science has shown, as adherents of some of the revealed faiths will sometimes feel compelled to do. All of this is true enough, and noteworthy enough, but I fear that what is overlooked in such emphases is an aspect of our lives that many of us will know firsthand although we may also be prejudiced against it, even inclined to automatically reject or ignore it. That aspect is the unexplained, the unexplainable, the felt but not comprehended, the numinous, the mystical. It is on this that I wish to dwell for a few moments, to try and ascertain whether there might not be something of practical usefulness within these inexplicable something

others.

Our contemporary habit of downplaying or dismissing the non-rational is unfortunate precisely because it is in fact an empirical part of our humanity, it is internally experienced and therefore it does indeed provide its own real evidence, even if such is not measurable by existing objective standards. In the following, then, I would like to ask us to pause and consider this strange numen-sense and what it might mean in our human struggles for fuller and more fulfilling modes of existence. To do so is important, I think, for the simple and succinct reason that the famed author and promoter of Zen in the United States and other Western countries Daisetsu Suzuki stated: "Mere thinking or logical reasoning will never succeed in clearing up problems of deep religious significance."[1] Let us therefore turn to this "problem" of those mystical moments that we know but do not know, that we have but cannot adequately describe. We will begin with some remarks on belief.

To believe a thing or to believe in a thing – whether of religious significance or not – entails the incorporation of that thing into one's worldview, and thereby to allow it to exert its influences on one's actions in the world. A belief, in this sense, is an invitation to an idea to come and live with one, to be one's companion in life and to whisper in one's ear its interpretations and determinations regarding any number of the multifarious elements one encounters on a given day. To hold a belief is in some ways like having a tool, a useful object which can be applied or not, but the analogy is imperfect for unlike a physical tool a belief cannot so easily be set aside if not called for. The conceptual frameworks that we are equipped with, or (to a lesser extent) gird ourselves with, for the most part remain with us whether we are actively considering them or not. If I put down my screwdriver after I have finished fastening two boards together it will no longer be an effective item for me until I pick it up again, whereas if I am not currently thinking about my view that the teaching of X holds much insight for ethical living its tenants will nevertheless still influence my judgments and behavior. That my view does so is due to the level from which beliefs, once adopted, once psychologically consolidated, reach out to affect the mind. That level is of course the intuitive level, it is the automatic and preconscious level out of which one's many rapid decisions and reactions spring: this is the cognitive machinery we have been given to deal with an environment where pausing to rationally weigh pros and cons is not always a biologically safe option. It is the level of our evolutionary legacy, and all nonhuman animals share it with us, although not all nonhuman animals also have our secondary level of those rational abilities wherein we can (and do) stop to mentally work things out, to reason, to think, to ponder.[2]

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[1] Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki, *Mysticism, Christian and Buddhist* (London: Forgotten Books, 1957/2007), p. 6. This work was first published by Harper (now HarperCollins Publishing) in New York; the cited is a direct reprint of that issue.

[2] There is a vast wealth of psychological and neurological research now presenting the two-tiered mental model very loosely outlined here, wherein the brain consists of a core level out of which preconscious (that is, not actively considered with awareness), automatic, and effortless judgments, perceptual interpretations, and behavioral decisions arise, and a secondary level where conscious, effortful, inefficient, time and

Beliefs rest within us so deeply that disregarding them requires enormous efforts, and disavowing oneself of them even more so as the very roots involved must first be discovered before any attempt at dislodgment might begin. It ought to be further noted that one's beliefs are very often an outcome of the embedded situation one is born into, of the way in which one happened to be raised, of the culture, native language, geographical location, historical epoch, socioeconomic standing, and all the rest of the incidental details of human existence inherited in the creation of each single "me".

What we have here, the reader will recognize, is Edmund Husserl's "horizon" and its deeper and further-reaching extension in Martin Heidegger's "world".[3] To put the point very briefly: the conceptual determines the perceptual, how we think so effectively structures our interpretations of all that we encounter that the mind through which we encounter (and understand) everything around us can only adequately be described as myopic. Both Husserl and Heidegger present us with systems whose totality is crucial, that explain the human condition as being so inextricably and predeterminately molded that the individual almost disappears into the maelstrom in which they have "fallen" (in Heidegger's terminology) when born – and that through nothing more decisive than the simple vagaries of one's birth, of one's fate. It is by the combination of such components that a person is made, and the quest – if it is actually purposefully taken on, if actively acknowledged and sought – becomes the lifelong journey of accepting the responsibility for making oneself into that which one would choose to be rather than that which one has become essentially by default. There is far, far more that could be written here on this subject, but let us refrain and limit the focus to our present concerns regarding beliefs.

To take an idea and turn it into an object, an Other – and most especially in cases involving love and devotion – is to impart a reality to it beyond anything the empirically measurable can claim because the difference between them (that is, between the reality of an idea or a belief and that of a piece of material) is one of degree more than it is one of kind. Graham Harman, in

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energy-consuming analyses take place. Although the secondary level can override the output of the primary level, nearly all of the time we function on the "autopilot" level of our mental core. For some accessible and general accounts of this research, interested readers may wish to see the following: Jonathan Haidt, "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment", *Psychological Review,* 108:4 (2001), 814-834; Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012); Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011); Amos Tversky, and Daniel Kahneman, "Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases", *Science,* 185:4157 (1974), 1124-1131; António Damásio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999); and Michael S. Gazzaniga, *Who's In Charge?: Free Will and the Science of the Brain* (New York: Ecco Press, 2011).

[3] On these very important concepts, a full explication of which is unfortunately beyond the scope of this article, I point the reader to: Edmund Husserl, *The Essential Husserl: Basic Writings in Transcendental Phenomenology,* intro. and ed. by Donn Welton (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999); David Woodruff Smith, *Husserl,* 2nd edn (Abingdon, OX: Routledge, 2013); Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time,* trans. by Joan Stambaugh, rev. and for. by Dennis J. Schmidt (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010); Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings: Key Selections from* Being and Time *to* The Task of Thinking, ed. by David Farrell Krell and for. by Taylor Carman (New York: HarperCollins, 2008); and Richard Sembera, *Rephrasing Heidegger: A Companion to* Being and Time (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2007).

a lengthy consideration of Heidegger's tool analysis (which Harman takes, somewhat uniquely, to be the cornerstone of all Heideggerean thought) writes that:

> Anything, prior to erupting in its explicit form, is real simply by exerting its efforts in the cosmos, by breathing its life into a world that would not have been the same without it. In other words, before any object is present-at-hand [*Vorhandenheit*], it is ready-to-hand [*Zuhandenheit*]: sincerely engaged in executing itself, inaugurating a reality in which its characteristic style is unleashed.[4]

This form of "reality" can be directly applied to ideas, to beliefs, in that the psychologically real has more influence on, and meaning for, any person's being than the merely physical constructs that surround us ever could. The matter is beyond the biological, beyond life and death: it is the view of – the *comprehension* of – life and death. Therein lies the whole of engaged consciousness, of human existence in the world, whereas the reach of the (uninterpreted, non-considered) merely physical remains buried inside one's preconscious processing. This is once more a matter of the levels at which our minds function, and although we could not survive without the automatic and continually operative procedures of our core preconscious intuitive judgments and reactions, it is on the higher plane of the abstract where our minds are primarily absorbed and where our lives are genuinely lived.[5] Unlike some of our nonhuman animal compatriots, we not only experience feelings and make decisions as we move about the contours of our lives, we self-reflectively feel and choose with an intensity of awareness that is unmatched anywhere on Earth. The difference is in fact demonstrated by those two words: "decision" and "choice". A decision might sometimes be rationally arrived at and sometimes not, any brain-determined output will qualify as such; a choice, on the other hand, can only be an output that has had reasoned analysis put into it. Ideas and beliefs are real in what they effect, and because they do effect, because they do become and indeed always are causal, they too arguably fall into the category of the empirical – the experientially empirical. This is Husserl's phenomenology thought of in the form that he did, as an investigative methodology of the *consciousness of* life, a way to segregate and scrutinize aspects of being from a subjective perspective that nevertheless yields extensively applicable conclusions.[6]

As a final note it should be pointed out that beliefs can come in a great many varieties, and to maintain a belief – even a purely religious belief – need not imply any kind of fundamentalist mentality. Ralph Ellis has stated that, "for some people, religion is little different from poetry in conveying vague, undefinable [*sic*] artistic insights that cannot be

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[4] Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Peru, IL: Open Court, 2002), pp. 219-220.

[5] Douglas Hofstadter has an illuminating discussion regarding the significance of the fact that our mental lives are spent in the seemingly non-physically reachable abstract despite being traceably physically conditioned on a neuronal basis in his *I Am A Strange Loop* (New York: Basic Books, 2007); see especially Chapters 12-14.

[6] See again Husserl, *op. cit.*; and Smith, *op. cit.*

translated into any literal statement", and "I think that when many religious people say that they 'believe' in this or that item of faith, they mean that they sense that something in it has this kind of nebulous, indefinable, and non-literal meaning."[7] It is exactly that type of "nebulous, indefinable, and non-literal" quality that characterizes the mystic experience, and it is often through the filter of religious beliefs that these experiences will be interpreted and meaning taken from or imparted to them. Mysticism is that very *something else*. With all of the foregoing in mind then, with all of what has been covered as a necessary background and as our own idea-foundation, we are at last ready to turn our attention more fully to an exploration of our topic at hand.

2. Doing

While it might be possible to observe someone having a mystic experience, or having what one takes to be a mystic experience, its phenomenology quite naturally calls for a subjective approach. These moments rise up from within us, physiologically speaking perhaps as part of the brain's limbic system, or more specifically the amygdala,[8] and structurally speaking (on our mental model) certainly as part of one's intuitive and preconscious level of mind.[9] This, however, does not remove such encounters from the possibility of study, and if we are willing to accept these felt instances as being worthy of examination then we may find that they have much to teach us. In that, via Suzuki, we can again see Buddhism's great emphasis on pragmatism and the practical. Suzuki writes, "Personal experience is thus seen to be the foundation of Buddhist philosophy. In this sense Buddhism is radical empiricism or experientialism, whatever dialectic later developed to probe the meaning of enlightenment-experience."[10] There is a great deal to be taken simply from the living out of one's life if one is sufficiently aware of and attuned to what is occurring within one as it occurs.[11] What might therefore be said about a so-called "mystical experience"?

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[7] Ralph D. Ellis, "Responses and Reactions", *Philosophy in the Contemporary World,* 15:2 (2008), 129-163 (pp. 131 and 132, respectively).

[8] For a brief overview of the physical components involved see the "Limbic system" article on *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia,* found at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Limbic_system (accessed May 30, 2018); for fuller details, among much else of interest, see also António Damásio, *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012); and V. S. Ramachandran, *The Tell-Tale Brain: Unlocking the Mystery of Human Nature* (London: Windmill Books, 2011). Many of the sources cited in footnote two above also cover aspects of brain structure and function.

[9] A theist-based argument could be made here that mystic experiences are rather something externally sourced, a gift or communication from God say, but whether that is the case or not does not change the felt awareness of such as being internal, and it is that awareness that I wish to focus on in the present.

[10] Suzuki, *op. cit.,* p. 45.

[11] Unfortunately, of course, many of us are not so aware, and hence the need for the kind of mindfulness training manuals that seem to be ever increasing; there is also much interesting crossover between mindfulness as Buddhism teaches it and Husserl's phenomenological methodology. For two easily accessible works on mindfulness and general Buddhist practice see: Steve Hagen, *Buddhism: Plain and Simple* (Boston: Charles E. Tuttle Co., Inc., 1997); and Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation,* trans. by Mobi Ho (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1975). Although the main topic of the article is elsewhere, I also make a brief case for Husserl's methods as essentially being a type of mindfulness in: Andrew

Definitionally mysticism is thought to provide direct access to truth or to knowledge, to a new way of understanding that is essentially inner or intuitive. Sister Carol Allan of the American Catholic organization The Sisters of Saint Joseph has described these moments as feeling mentally and emotionally unfamiliar as they happen but nevertheless as having a familiarity to them, and that such are often meaning-making and meaning-producing for people, possibly affecting the whole trajectory of an individual's being. She gives the example of a Sister in her group who is "quite mystical" in personal aura, but whose essence of that mysticism is not a constant, rather only there (or most pronounced) when she teaches. The matter of what she says is not necessarily profound in and of itself, Sister Allan relates, yet its content does still resonate as such. There is a change in the air or in the light at those times, and that alteration is one that is experienced and not "seen".[12]

It is the emphasis on meaning that I think is most fruitful in an approach to mystical experiences. As our study's opening section attempted to demonstrate, what one believes, what one takes to be true (to whatever degree), has an enormously far-reaching influence on one's life through the decisions and choices that one makes, the actions that one undertakes, the emotions that one allows to grow or that one attempts to stem, and the many multifarious other ways in which a worldview gives rise to a way of living in the world. Once more, the conceptual determines the perceptual, and the perceived in turn feeds each and every interpretation along with all that is derivative thereby. A mystic experience, if taken as valuable and as informative, can undoubtedly form the basis – or at least *inform* the basis – of a belief, and thereafter one's journey through life. This is perhaps the first and primary benefit.

To have any effect, small or large, will however first require an openness to these kinds of experiences and a willingness to apply them psychologically and behaviorally. Learning to accept and appreciate the mystical might strike some as cutting across the grain of the contemporary global cultural Zeitgeist with its emphasis on the empirically (i.e. scientifically) provable, but if confronted by such doubts we ought to remember both that as experiential mysticism is in fact empirical (although its data are not measurable), and that there are moreover typically any number of aspects that we may hold dear simply and purely for their innate worth, without thought for further consequences. Ellis has suggested that in the case of some intrinsic values their significance is sharpened by thoughts of our own finitude and the sense of the tragic that such usually carry.[13] For many people dwelling on one's coming death and the accompanying cessation of self can be a saddening – or even horrifying – affair, and based on my own conversations with others this appears to at least partially apply even to those who believe in an afterlife. This conclusion, I think, is the exact wrong approach to human

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Oberg, "The Phenomenology of Sexual Desire and the Ethics of Relation", *Cultural Studies,* 6 (2018), 35-48.

[12] These comments were made to me personally on a visit to Elms College in Chicopee, Massachusetts, USA, where Sister Allan is the Director of Campus Ministry and the Co-director of First Year Seminar courses.

[13] Ellis, *op. cit.*

finitude,[14] but the point that Ellis makes regarding a heightening of the inherent worth of certain elements or activities is an instructive one. If we can extend this attitude to those moments when we are suddenly struck by a thunderous intuition or an unforeseen insight that we accredit to a glimpse of the transcendent, then we can in turn receive much from the mystic in our lives, regardless of whether the further step of assigning deity to the transcendent is taken or not. Experiences of mysticism are certainly instances of the beyond, but "beyond what" is a question that need not be answered in any particular manner, or even at all.

In practice inviting the mystic into our lives carries with it the additional advantage of the loosening of one's worldview and a readiness to shift and adjust whatever outlook on life one may be holding, leading to a very non-fundamentalist and quite likely ecumenically diverse attitude. If the ideas and beliefs we hold do indeed inform as many aspects of our lives as the psychological research covered above indicates, then the relaxing of one's grip on those ideas and beliefs that would come with an acceptance of the possibility of gaining wisdom through mystical experiences would also be beneficial as a bulwark against the potential negatives that might accompany judgments made or interpretations drawn. The Zen Buddhism that Suzuki's writings helped spread in particular prioritizes the trusting of one's intuition and the making of efforts to follow it as closely as possible, moment by moment throughout a life that is lived in the moment,[15] but surely prudence dictates that there are times (perhaps many) when one's initial determinations are simply wrong. Allowing answers and understandings to come from where they may, and maintaining a position of reflection and consideration on those same answers and understandings, would engender a personal approach to the experiential that let it speak but did not allow it to shout. This is letting the mystic live and breathe alongside one, but not necessarily dictate to one. This is inviting mysticism in, while not forgetting that it is a guest. This is being in the world, being as the world.

3. Being

An embrace of what mystic experiences have to offer along the lines outlined in the foregoing would result in the further ancillary benefits of an existence that is free-flowing, becoming, spent in Heidegger's famed "clearing" rather than in the rigidity of received views and controlled acts bequeathed by the heritage of one's embeddedness. It would – or could – mean a movement away from being human as Korean, human as Nigerian, human as a white-collared female engineer, human as a blue-colored male wait staff, human as et cetera, et

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14 My own views on finitude and its implications can be found in: Andrew Oberg, "Living While Dying: Reflections on Death's Harm, Finitude, Meaning, and Uncertainty", *Journal of International Philosophy,* 5 (2016), 325-339.

15 Some works on Zen that I have found to be informative and approachable are: Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957); Seung Sahn, *Ten Gates: The Kong-an Teaching of Zen Master Seung Sahn,* ed. and rev. by Dae Kwang, for. by Robert Aitken (Boston: Shambhala, 2007); and Paul Reps (compiler), *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones: A Collection of Zen and Pre-Zen Writings,* parts I-III transcribed by Nyogen Senzaki and Paul Reps (New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1961).

cetera, and into being human as one, two, three, four, human as time unfolding in an ever expanding cosmos, human as yet-not-yet. This is a knowledge that realizes that it does not really know, that it is impossible *to* really know, and that is liberated and expanded by that admission. In the words of the German theologian (and famed mystic) Meister Eckhart, it is "transformed knowledge…it is by knowing that we get to this unknowing, then we know by divine knowing, then our ignorance is ennobled and adorned with supernatural knowledge."[16] John Caputo has similarly argued that truth ought to be considered along such lines, that it should be held lightly and always remain open to change.[17] Additionally, in the introduction to his translation of Plato's *Timaeus*, Benjamin Jowett writes that, "Not only Buddhism, but Greek as well as Christian philosophy, show that it is quite possible that the human mind should retain an enthusiasm for mere negations",[18] and here we see too the Hindu description of (the) Ultimate Reality as *neti, neti* (not this, not this).[19] Given our limitations we must recognize and stand in awe of all that is unreachable, and a mystic attitude both admits and promotes this stance. The further we free ourselves to the potential that is beyond the deeper we are humbled in the presently concrete.

This is a lesson our greatest teachers have stressed and re-stressed, regardless of tradition, culture, or epoch. In his work *Honest to Jesus* the New Testament scholar Robert Funk painstakingly dissects the historical evidence for what Jesus most likely actually said and did (and further what are almost certainly additions made many years later) and concludes that a central teaching was that we are already in the "Kingdom of God": heaven is here now in this life and our task is to live it.[20] "Nirvana", Suzuki states, "is saṃsāra and saṃsāra is Nirvana."[21] We exist in the midst of a great, unsolvable riddle – life unfolding – and cannot hope to have more than what we grasp after as we struggle through. Yet we are not without guides on our quest, and many of us have also become pointers and signposts for others along the way; we can listen and learn. We can also equip ourselves with the tools that we already have: those direct experiences of the inexplicable, the ineffable, which form our encounters with mysticism in all its many shapes and sizes. We may not, and probably cannot, predict when such might happen to us, but by remaining accepting and receptive to them we fill out our brief lives with a greater depth of meaning, purpose, and a quietude that reaches towards tranquility. Divine ignorance, if you like, transcendent negativity, pregnant emptiness. Mysticism lived.

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16 Quoted in Suzuki, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

17 John D. Caputo, *Truth* (London: Penguin Books, 2013); in this Caputo largely follows (and glowingly acknowledges) the work of Jacques Derrida.

18 Quoted in Suzuki, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

19 I have found F. Max Müller's compilation of selections from *The Upanishads* to be an excellent resource, see: F. Max Müller, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads,* trans. F. Max Müller, rev., intro., and notes by Suren Navlakha (London: Wordsworth Editions/Bibliophile Books, 2000).

20 Robert W. Funk, *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (San Francisco: Polebridge Press/HarperCollins, 1996).

21 Suzuki, *op. cit.*, p. 93; saṃsāra is the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth from which escape is sought, with nirvana being that escape.

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